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ABSTRACT

This issue of a publication informing health policy and health care services in California in support of Proposition 10, the Children and Families Act, focuses on building community support for preparing children to enter school ready to learn through the use of Proposition 10 Commissions. These Commissions would help ensure that school readiness programs result in improved child outcomes by investing in neighborhood-level decision-making models that support sustained community development. The publication delineates characteristics of community decision making that facilitate resident and parent decision making, and describes the use of community decision making in national, state, and local programs. Also described are roles for residents and parents in decision making. The Canadian Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project and the federal Healthy Start program are presented as examples of early childhood initiatives leading to positive health outcomes, a more engaged community, improved services and conditions, and greater community capacity. The California Healthy Start program is highlighted as an example of a program using community-generated, collaborative strategies for providing more comprehensive, integrated services linked to schools. The publication then discusses challenges to neighborhood-level decision making, including parent/resident availability, professional social service culture, power and authority issues, language and culture issues, time to build trust and mutual respect, and the process versus product challenge. The publication concludes with a discussion of early lessons learned by the Children and Families First Commission of Ventura County. (Lists 7 Web site resources and contains 45 endnotes.) (KB)

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Field Lessons

Strategies to Support California's Children and Families Act

Inside Building Community Support

- Parent Partnerships *Page 5*
- Neighborhoods for Learning *Page 8–9*
- Recommendations *Page 12*

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Improved outcomes for children and communities

Building Community Support for School Readiness: A Prop. 10 Opportunity

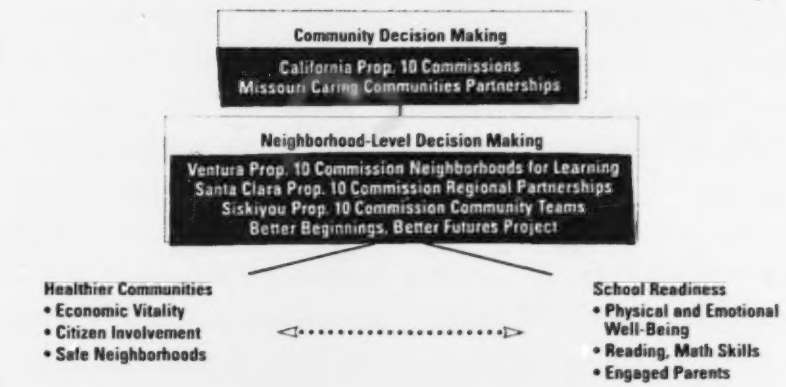
School readiness and later academic success of children cannot be addressed outside of the neighborhoods and communities in which young children live.[1,2] Nearly 500,000 California children enter kindergarten each year.[3] Experts estimate that at least 35 percent of these children may not be adequately prepared to enter school.[4]

Preparing children to enter school ready to learn requires the active participation of parents and community residents. Combining the strength and resources of parents, local residents, and service providers builds processes to improve outcomes for children, families and communities.[5]

California Children and Families (Prop. 10) Commissions can help ensure that school readiness programs result in improved outcomes for children by investing in neighborhood-level decision making models that support sustained community involvement.

Neighborhood-level decision making builds community, improves the health and well-being of a community and supports children's ability to learn and thrive. This conceptual model and its application to Prop. 10 will be explored in this brief. The Ventura County Children and Families Commission's Neighborhoods for Learning (NfLs) is a special focus.

Community Decision Making Produces Positive Results


Community Decision Making
California Prop. 10 Commissions
Missouri Caring Communities Partnerships
Neighborhood-Level Decision Making
Ventura Prop. 10 Commission Neighborhoods for Learning
Santa Clara Prop. 10 Commission Regional Partnerships
Siskiyou Prop. 10 Commission Community Teams
Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project
Healthier Communities
• Economic Vitality
• Citizen Involvement
• Safe Neighborhoods
School Readiness
• Physical and Emotional Well-Being
• Reading, Math Skills
• Engaged Parents

Source: Center for Health Improvement, May 2002.

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Community Decision Making and Early Childhood Initiatives

Across the nation and the world, comprehensive early childhood initiatives utilize the process of community decision making to design programs aimed at preparing children for school. According to the Center for the Study of Social Policy, community decision making builds a "process and mechanisms to improve results for children, families and communities by combining the strength and resources of government and the existing human services system with the will of the people to do together what they could not do apart."[6]

Community decision making may occur under a nationally sponsored initiative such as England's Sure Start, a program that funds local efforts to "improve the health and well-being of families and children before and from birth, so children are ready to flourish when they go to school."[7] Community decision making is also seen in state-sponsored efforts such as the Missouri Family Investment Trust's Caring Communities Partnerships (CCP) that represent a county or groups of counties. The CCPs are part of a systemic reform initiative. Their mission is "for children to have strong families, and communities where parents are working, children are succeeding in school, and growing up healthy, safe, and prepared to enter productive adulthood."[8] In California, the California Children and Families Act (Prop. 10) is structured to give commissions in each of California's 58 counties decision-making authority "to provide, on a community-by-community basis, all children prenatal to five years of age with a comprehensive, integrated system of early childhood development services."[9]

Many programs set a high standard for resident and parental involvement to ensure that those individuals closest to an issue or concern are involved in creating solutions that will best fit the community. Ontario, Canada's Better Beginnings Better Futures Project, a 25-year longitudinal prevention demonstration project for young children and their families, has resident participation as a core component. Launched in 1990 by the government of Ontario, the project's intent was to "discover effective ways of supporting the healthy development of young children and strengthening family and community life in disadvantaged neighborhoods."[10] Eight neighborhood sites were selected to participate in the project. Each site was charged with involving community residents with all aspects of program design and implementation. To ensure resident participation, a "50 percent" rule was established, requiring each Better Beginnings organization's steering committee and subcommittee to be made up of at least 50 percent residents as members.[11]

In the United States, Head Start has been a pioneer in engaging parents in neighborhood-level decision making. Head Start and Early Head Start are comprehensive child development programs that serve children from birth

Characteristics of Community Decision Making

Characteristics of community decision making that facilitate resident and parent decision making include:

- An inclusive decision-making structure (i.e., parents, residents and providers involved)
- A focus on specifically defined geographical areas (i.e., a county or a neighborhood)
- A focus on a set of results (i.e., children ready for school)
- Comprehensive strategies with both formal and informal systems and supports
- Influence over resource allocation
- Credibility (i.e., earned respect from the community; neighborhood languages and culture are reflected)
- A high level of commitment to transfer decision-making authority from state government, county government, or commission to the local level, including formal recognition

Source: Center for the Study of Social Policy. *Theory and Purpose of Local Decisionmaking: Building Capacity for Local Decisionmaking.* June 2001: 38–39.

to age five, pregnant women, and their families with the overall goal of increasing the school readiness of young children in low-income families.[12] Head Start requires that all of their programs establish and maintain a formal structure of shared governance through which parents can participate in policymaking or in other decisions about the program.[13] Policy councils and policy committees must be comprised of two types of representatives: parents of currently enrolled children and community representatives. At least 51 percent of the members of these policy groups must be the parents of currently enrolled children.

Neighborhood-Level Decision Making Creates Results for Communities and Children

By engaging parents, residents, service providers and local businesses in decision making, neighborhoods can build healthier communities and achieve positive outcomes for children and families. Neighborhood residents can play significant roles throughout the process of designing, implementing and evaluating neighborhood-based efforts.

Roles for residents and parents can include[14]:

- Participants in assets mapping, needs assessments and priority setting
- Program designers
- Members of policy boards and advisory committees with shared program authority
- Paid program staff, consultants, mentors
- Grant reviewers
- Facilitators
- Classroom and group activity volunteers
- Program evaluators

When community residents become decision makers, their investment in improving results for children and families in their community is increased. "Without meaningful resident participation…efforts usually go awry, often missing the mark of what is most needed in a specific neighborhood."[15]

Involving community residents who reflect the cultural, linguistic and economic diversity of their neighborhoods in decision making roles is critical to ensuring that programs are relevant to the community served. "Community involvement often enhances programs' cultural sensitivity, responsiveness and comprehensiveness."[16] Engaging a diverse representation of residents builds on the strengths and unique assets of neighborhoods to support community change.

Involving residents often enhances programs' cultural sensitivity, responsiveness & comprehensiveness.

Community involvement in the federal Healthy Start program resulted in positive community health outcomes.[17]

Building Healthier Communities

The community work in early childhood initiatives can lead to positive health outcomes, a more engaged community, improved services and conditions, and greater community capacity. Community change initiatives, like the California Children and Families Commission School Readiness Initiative, can result in increased community participation, increased investment of resources, changes in social policy and enhanced community leadership.[18]

The Canadian Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project focuses its work in disadvantaged neighborhoods that are challenged to determine how they will make a difference for the children in their community. This challenge has resulted in new programs for children and their families that have been locally accepted. Community residents are key decision makers and actively involved in all aspects of program development and delivery.[19] The community has been engaged in ways "that (have) built leadership, capacity and cohesion."[20] Resident involvement and experiences in the project have resulted in "improvements in the physical safety and appearance of communities"[21] and a greater "sense of ownership and responsibility for their community."[22]

In 1991, the federal Healthy Start program was launched in response to concern over infant mortality in the United States. A central component of the Healthy Start model is community involvement in planning, implementation and evaluation. In 1999, PolicyLink initiated a nine-city study of Healthy Start sites to discover the effects of community involvement.[23] They found that positive health outcomes were coupled with significant community outcomes. Community involvement:

- Empowered individuals to take action in the broader community
- Mobilized the community to work for health-related goals and objectives
- Contributed to community capacity building and infrastructure
- Mobilized the community to help bring about changes in programs, policies and practices
- Helped institute best practices in the community[24]

Building School Readiness through Parent Partnerships

What occurs before children are born until the day they enter kindergarten, is critical to their academic success.[25] Recent research shows that in the first years, important connections are made in the brain as the child interacts with his/her family, caregivers and community.[26] These relationships impact lifelong learning.

Research shows that the "best results are gained (for children) when parents are involved in both learning and decision making."[27] Parents are their children's first teacher and play the central role in supporting their early learning experiences. Research shows that children whose parents actively encourage their exploration and learning have the skills and abilities essential for school readiness.[28] Parental encouragement of early learning supports a child's cognitive development and impacts later academic achievement.[29] As children enter school, the link between parent involvement and academic achievement continues.[30] Children whose parents are involved in their education, as early as preschool, tend to have higher grades, higher test scores and higher graduation rates, regardless of their socioeconomic status or ethnic background.[31]

California's Healthy Start is one of the largest statewide efforts to improve results for school-age children, younger siblings and families. The program uses community-generated, collaborative strategies for providing more comprehensive, integrated services linked to schools. Since the first programs were funded in 1992, California's Healthy Start schools have shown improvements in test scores, improvements in children's classroom behavior and greater parent participation in school activities.[32] Families participating in Healthy Start have gained access to health services, childcare and emergency assistance. Family violence has decreased among Healthy Start families as parents learn more about their child's development.

Short-term findings from Canada's Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project have shown consistent patterns in positive outcomes for children's emotional, behavioral and social functioning.[33] Project sites that made the most sustained and committed effort to involve and engage parents showed the strongest patterns of positive parent outcomes. Parents reported fewer tension producing events, less tension juggling childcare and other responsibilities, more social support, reduced alcohol consumption and increased exercise.[34] Changes were strongest for children and families when programs were "intensive, continuous and focused."[35]

In programs designed to involve parents in full partnerships, student achievement for economically disadvantaged children not only improves, but can also reach levels that are standard for middle-class children. Children who are furthest behind are most likely to make the greatest gains.[36]

Components of School Readiness

- Children's readiness for school
- Schools' readiness for children
- Family and community supports and services that contribute to children's school readiness, including families as partners in school readiness through involvement and participation

Source: Adapted and expanded from the National Education Goals Panel. *Getting a Good Start in School.* National Education Goals Panel. 1997.

Challenges to Neighborhood-Level Decision Making

Meaningful and sustained parent and resident participation can be challenging, especially in neighborhoods that are not used to working in partnership with local community-based organizations, schools or other public organizations.

Parent/Resident Availability

Individuals who are juggling the responsibilities of work, family or school have little time to commit to participating in neighborhood initiatives. Residents may also be challenged by the lack of available transportation and childcare that would enable them to participate. However, it is critical that people affected by a decision are involved in making decisions.[37] (See box on page seven.)

Professional Social Service Culture

Terminology that includes unfamiliar acronyms and meeting procedures can inhibit local resident participation.

Power and Authority

When individuals come together from different backgrounds, representing different communities and organizations, there are often unspoken power dynamics that emerge. This can be seen when funders come together at the table with grantees and when service providers sit alongside parents who may be clients in their programs.

Language and Culture

Engaging residents in decision making when their primary language is not spoken can limit their willingness to participate. Cultural norms also can dictate the degree to which individuals feel comfortable expressing their views in public meetings.

Trust and Mutual Respect

Building trust among people who have not traditionally worked together can take time. An individual's willingness to continue to participate can be influenced by the level of perceived trust and respect this person feels others have for his or her input.

Leadership

Neighborhood-level decision making shifts leadership to local residents. It can be a challenge for those who have initiated a neighborhood-level initiative to both honor and support the competence of residents as leaders.

The Process Versus Product Challenge

"Creating change over time requires investment in the capacity of individuals and institutions in neighborhoods."[38] Balancing this notion with the desire to see results soon can be difficult.

Sustained and Meaningful Community Ownership

Getting the input of parents and residents in the early stages of a community initiative is less of a challenge than keeping them involved. Sustaining involvement requires an ongoing commitment to building community involvement and support for meaningful outcomes that will resonate with the community.

When historically marginalized **groups have a voice** in shaping the systems that **affect** the lives of their children, we can expect cutting-edge and **powerful changes.**[41]

CCFC Inclusive Governance and Participation Principles

In June 2001 the state California Children and Families Commission (CCFC) Advisory Committee on Diversity approved a set of Equity Principles to be used to guide the commission's policy work and funding decisions. The principles were designed as "guidelines to ensure that the programs and services established and supported by Prop. 10 funds are both culturally and linguistically competent and inclusive in serving children with disabilities and other special needs."[39] One of the major components of the Equity Principles is "inclusive governance and participation." This means that families and caregivers "from diverse backgrounds and with diverse abilities" will be actively involved in "the planning, delivery and evaluation" of Prop. 10 initiatives. Inclusive governance "ensures that people reflecting the diverse perspectives of the kinds of people affected by a decision are involved in making or shaping decisions (i.e., recipients of services, community residents, service providers, policymakers, funders, etc.)."[40]

Photo Credit: Oxnard NfL

Neighborhoods for Learning in Action

When Elena enters kindergarten in the Fall 2002 she will be one of 600 children in Oxnard who participated in the Pre-Kindergarten Summer Institute, "Ready, Set, Go!", offered through the Oxnard School District NfL. Elena is one of the many Oxnard children who would have entered kindergarten without having participated in any preschool programs. In addition to the Pre-K Institute, Elena's parents may choose from the five family hub centers in the district for parenting classes. Elena's mom is one of 19 members of the Oxnard NfL Advisory Board who identified the need for "Ready, Set, Go!" and emerging family programming.*

The Oxnard NfL is an example of a school-based NfL. The commission contracts with the school district to administer the NfL, but the steering committee makes all policy decisions. The committee includes parents, grandparents, a kindergarten teacher, private and public preschool educators, members of the faith community, nonprofit service providers, business people, public sector providers and members of the local childcare planning council. The steering committee truly mirrors the community. In this case, those whose input was sought during the planning phase are now the ones empowered to make the program decisions for their community. The committee recently voted in officers and made funding decisions for mini-grants for community programs.

**Not her real name*

Ventura Prop. 10 Commission Invests in Neighborhood Decision Making for School Readiness

In the earliest stages of planning, the Children and Families First Commission of Ventura County identified children's emotional, social and academic readiness for school as a primary goal. It decided that the best way of achieving this goal was for local neighborhoods to lead the way in supporting young children in their communities. The commission committed the largest percentage of its Prop.10 revenue—55 percent—toward the Neighborhoods for Learning (NfL) Initiative. Centered on local, neighborhood-level decision making, residents and service providers were charged with implementing a plan built on the unique assets of their neighborhoods.

The vision

Two underlying assumptions are built into the NfL model. The first is that preparing children to enter school is best achieved through programs designed and implemented by local residents. The second is that neighborhoods are where learning takes place. Therefore, if all the community assets that contribute to the well-being of young children were identified, aligned and coordinated on behalf of young children and their families into a "family friendly" community, then children would have a better chance of being prepared to succeed in school and in life.

The model

The commission initially allocated funding for seven regions, defined by geography and city limits. These regions ultimately grew to 11 NfLs to accommodate locally determined neighborhood boundaries. The commission developed regional allocations based on several community factors, including the number of children from birth to age five, school readiness factors and income. Each NfL was to "be unique to the community in which it operates and reflect its culture(s) and values."

Each neighborhood went through an extensive planning process to map local assets, determine needs and design local school readiness plans. When the community completed its comprehensive planning process, a request for applications (RFA) was released to that community. Responses to the RFA were the neighborhood's local plan for school readiness. Plans had to be reviewed by an independent review committee made up of community members and presented to the commission with a recommendation for funding.

The commission envisioned the NfL as a cooperative effort among multiple community service providers and resources. However, through the RFA process, the commis-

sion sought to identify a contract agency for each NfL—a member of the collaborative with specific responsibilities—that would assume management of the project's finances, contract requirements and scope of work, and facilitate multi-agency/resources collaboration. In many of the NfLs, the elementary school districts have been the contract agency and have played an important leadership role, partnering with parents, community-based organizations, early childhood providers, local government agencies, libraries, hospitals and faith-based groups to develop a plan representing the unique needs of their community.

Local governance and parent participation

Each NfL was expected to involve and engage local residents in the planning process. In their applications for funding, the NfLs were asked to describe how their projects would be governed and the specific roles of key participants, including parents and underrepresented groups, in the governance structure. Parent participation was essential to the development of the NfLs—not just as consumers but also as policymakers and providers.

The commission also established a Parent Advisory Group to provide input on issues of concern to parents throughout the county. An active group of parents, recruited to reflect the geographic, cultural, ethnic and economic diversity of the county, meets monthly in addition to participating in all commission committees and review of applications for funding.

Implementation of the NfLs

The implementation of the NfLs in Ventura County has included four critical stages:

1. Local-level, asset based strategic planning
2. Building collaborations and integrating services
3. Developing a model of ongoing governance
4. Building local capacity so that the projects become sustainable under local leadership

Evaluation

The success of the NfL model will be evaluated in terms of process outcomes, intermediate outcomes and long-range school readiness outcomes.[42] The evaluation of the NfLs will include both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies to assess the impact of programs and services on the children and families served.[43] This combination of methods will give a picture of the short-term and long-term impact of the commission's investment in outcomes for children and families. Data will be collected and desired results measured on three levels: 1) systems 2) program and 3) individual child and family.[44]

Early lessons learned

The NfLs are in the initial stages of implementation and it is too early to determine how they may impact school readiness for the 12,588[45] children who enter kindergarten in Ventura County each year. However, early lessons learned are helping to shape the commission's continued support of the NfLs and can guide other commissions that are interested in implementing community-driven school readiness programs. Some of the early lessons learned include:

Need for champions and leaders. Communities most successful in mobilizing collaborative planning efforts have been characterized by the early identification of champions/leaders who understand school readiness and can "carry the torch" to begin the process.

Thinking assets not needs. Having planning groups view their communities in terms of broad-based community assets, including those not typically associated with early childhood initiatives such as inclusion of local law enforcement, has been an important part of the process.

Importance of moving from an "input" model to an "inclusion" model. One of the greatest challenges has been bringing all groups, particularly underrepresented groups, to the table in a way that incorporates them into the planning process, not just solicits their input through traditional methods such as surveys, focus groups, etc. Building and sustaining a local governance structure with active parent participation is both challenging and essential.

Being flexible and maintaining a long-term perspective. Community-based planning and system change is a long-term commitment. The commission strives to maintain the overall vision for the initiative, inspiring the vision of local communities, maintaining flexibility in the defined program parameters and recognizing that community collaboratives and their plans will "evolve" over time.

Ongoing commission support and technical assistance for NfLs. The commission's role is to serve as a bridge between NfLs, and provide necessary technical assistance the NfLs may need to move forward. This may include support and tools to assist in sustaining meaningful parent involvement and to build resident/parent leadership. It may be sharing emerging local, statewide or national models and best practices. The key is for the commission to be responsive to the shared and unique needs for assistance that emerge from the NfLs.

Resources

- The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Initiatives: A forum for discussion of the challenges and lessons learned from comprehensive community initiatives, http://www.aspenroundtable.org
- Better Beginnings: Better Futures: A 25-year longitudinal prevention, policy research, demonstration project in Ontario, Canada focused on at-risk children ages 0–8, http://www.opc.on.ca/bbbf/
- Center for the Study of Social Policy: Provides policy analysis and technical assistance in the areas of family and children's services, income supports, neighborhood-based services, education reform, family support, disability and health care policy, and long term care for the elderly, http://www.cssp.org
- Children and Families Commission of Santa Clara County Regional Partnership: Initiatives represent six geographic areas in the community that will design and implement plans for programs, services and activities. The initiative requires 51 percent of partnership membership to be comprised of community members, http://www.santaclarakids.org
- Children and Families First Commission of Ventura County, Neighborhoods for Learning: Local residents and service providers are charged with implementing a plan built on the unique assets of their neighborhoods in order to achieve school readiness in their communities, http://www.vcchildren.org
- Siskiyou Children and Families Commission and Butte Valley Community Team: Community teams start and drive program partnerships with the commission. Ten teams have been formed to identify how to best meet local needs, http://ccfc.ca.gov/siskiyou/Community_Teams___Projects/community_teams___projects.html
- Sure Start: The goal of England's initiative is to improve the health and well-being of children prenatal to age four. The target is to have 500 local Sure Start programs by 2004 in neighborhoods with high numbers of children living in poverty, http://www.surestart.gov.uk

About the Author

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Building Community Support for School Readiness: Recommendations

Prop. 10 commissions are catalysts for systems change. Systems change is based on a long-term investment, community ownership and the evaluation process. There are several steps commissions may consider to build community ownership.

1. ***Allocate funding toward neighborhood-based school readiness programs.*** Allow considerable local control and flexibility to tailor the community's programs to local needs.

2. ***Provide communities guidelines for local involvement.*** Require community involvement in planning, implementation and evaluation. Set minimum levels of resident and parent representation on decision-making bodies (i.e., at least 50 percent). Establish inclusive governance guidelines or require the incorporation of the CCFC Equity Principles to guide local planning that ensures decision-making bodies reflect the community served.

3. ***Invest in ongoing community capacity building and leadership development that builds on community assets and strengths.*** Provide ongoing technical assistance that supports local governance and the inclusion of those traditionally underrepresented. Support networking and learning between neighborhood-level programs.

4. ***Build governance and community indicators into evaluation.*** There are significant challenges in determining the success of large-scale community initiatives. Some of these relate to the difficulty of evaluating comprehensive initiatives, variations in program services, intensity, and duration across multiple sites. Some challenges relate to the intended and unintended results (i.e., changes on broad indicators or outcomes versus capacity and community building). Incorporating indicators that measure governance and community capacity will provide a more complete picture of the impact of Prop. 10 on children and communities.

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The Center for Health Improvement (CHI), formerly the California Center for Health Improvement, is a health policy center based in Sacramento, California. CHI serves as a catalyst to focus health policy and healthcare services on prevention.

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13

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